

10 REASONS TO CLIMB; 10 BILLINGS FIREFIGHTERS HEAD TO STAIRCLIMB IN SEATTLE TO SUPPORT LEUKEMIA & LYMPHOMA SOCIETY

Assistant Training Chief Chris Voller has made the commitment to climb 1,356 steps in full firefighter gear on March 12 in Seattle.

He'll be climbing 69 flights of stairs alongside nine other firefighters with the Billings Fire Department.

Each of them has their own reason why they're making the climb.

"Every single climber has someone that has touched their lives and has fought leukemia, lymphoma, or a different type of cancer, and they're racing to raise awareness," explained Voller.



*A firefighter participates in the stairclimb.
Photo courtesy of LLSWA.org*

Voller's why is his 4-year-old son named Tristan.

"Watching this guy in all his accomplishments and challenges, and how he has risen above every single one of them gives you unbelievable inspiration," Voller said.

When Tristan was 2, he was diagnosed with B-Cell Acute Lymphoblastic Leukemia.

Voller and his wife Ashlee have been by Tristan's side every step of the way.

"We see firsthand how bad cancer is, but it never really truly hits home until it's your own child," Voller said.

Tristan is their first born. Ashlee was 35 weeks pregnant with their second child when they received an explanation for Tristan's knee and elbow pain.



A September 2021 photo of Tristan in the hospital shortly after his diagnosis.

"I got the phone call that no parent ever wants to receive, which was the orthopedic surgeon calling and saying, 'We are transferring your son's case to oncology.' Most people hear oncology, and they don't quite know what that word is. Unfortunately for me, with my experience from the fire department, I know exactly what oncology meant. So, I knew they were calling me to tell me my son has cancer," said Voller.

Tristan and his mom were flown to Denver and where he went through five weeks of intensive treatment.

Since returning home he has continued treatment through Billings Clinic and takes chemotherapy drugs every day.

"Tristan finished frontline treatment last summer and is now in maintenance. We will continue this until January 2024, which is when he will ring the bell," Voller said.

Even with transitioning from frontline care to less intense treatments, the Vollers are still on high alert, and the first sign of a fever means a trip to the emergency room.

You learn that you can no longer plan because you're at the mercy of his body and what the cancer is doing inside of his body. Even now, we can't plan anything even though we're in maintenance because if he gets a fever, he goes straight into the hospital. You have to be there within an hour," explained Voller.

Throughout Tristan's battle with leukemia, the Vollers have been raising awareness about the disease and sharing their experiences.

"You learn to just roll with punches. You can't change things, as much as you wish you could. The best way to describe it is, every single week, you're faced with a new challenge you didn't know you'd be faced with because of how he's doing and what that cancer is doing to his body. It ranges from not eating because the chemo treatment he's on every night messes with his digestive tract, to extreme weight gain when we're on high-dose steroids. It's the doctor visits, the treatment days, the lumbar punctures. Every single week you're tasked with a new challenge that you couldn't prepare for, that you didn't think of, and now it's smack-dab in front of you," explained Voller.

He's taking his mission to raise awareness one step further by fundraising for the Leukemia & Lymphoma Society, which is committed to blood cancer research and patient services.

"Without their involvement, this diagnosis, 40 years ago, would've been a death sentence. Advancements in their research, medicine, and diagnosis has shown that Tristan will have a great life ahead of him," said Voller.

The Leukemia and Lymphoma Society hosts the stairclimb at the Columbia Center in downtown Seattle.

Only open to career and volunteer firefighters, participants must wear full turnout gear while on air.



"That's about 65 pounds of extra weight. The restriction of extra clothing and air pack makes it difficult and hot," Voller explained.

Billings firefighters have participated in the climb over the past decade or so. This will be Voller's first time participating in the climb.

Tristan's strength is his inspiration.

"Through it all, Tristan has been amazing. He has taken it in stride. He has kept his youthful cheerfulness, and that is my full inspiration. He can be going through such a horrible time in his life, such a horrible, horrible disease and diagnosis, and he just wants to play. Now 4 years old, all he wants to do is hang out with his friends and play," said Voller.

And he says his wife Ashlee is his rock.

"I don't know how she was able to do this, especially when it started. We got through the entire five weeks down in Denver and then when we were able to come home; one week later Austin was born," he said.

Austin is 15 months old now.

Through it all, Voller had another family to lean on.

It's always talked about, the brotherhood of the Fire Department. When one of us is hurting, support is shown in full force. When we first started this journey, guys didn't know how to help, so they showed support ranging from working my shifts without wanting anything back to helping pay for expenses throughout this process. We were down in Denver for five weeks and never once was I worried about my house or two dogs. The firefighters and community showed up and took care of everything," Voller explained.

On Thursday, February 16, Voller and the rest of the Billings Fire Department's climb team will be at Diamond X Beer Co. at 5417 Hawk Creek Avenue to raise funds from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m.

A portion of sales that evening will go toward their fundraising efforts.

The team plans to spread the word about leukemia and lymphoma during the event. They'll also be selling merchandise like t-shirts and commemorative pint glasses.



The Voller family. From left to right: Ashlee, Austin, Tristan, and Chris.

"We are strictly looking to raise money for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society and to help cure cancer," said Voller. Each firefighter participating in the climb is covering their own expenses for travel and registration.

This year the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society's goal is to raise \$3 million.

Voller explained beyond any monetary contributions, blood donations are also another way to show support.

It's something he does in honor of Tristan.

Getting a needlestick is something his son is all too familiar with.

Tristan has an implanted port on his chest for blood draws and administering medication.

"There's still a bruise there, but that's ok," Tristan said while looking down at his port.

The small bruise is from his most recent hospital visit when he spiked a fever.

"We put some cream on, then we gotta put the butterfly in and we gotta take butterfly medicine," Tristan said as he explained the process.

When it comes to recognizing his own strength, Tristan is humble. But there is one thing he's certain of at just 4 years old.

"When I grow up, I'm gonna go to the fire department with dad," he said proudly.



A photo of Tristan and his dad in October of 2021.

You can follow Tristan's progress by visiting [Tristan's Leukemia Journey](#) on Facebook.

More information about the stair climb can be found by visiting [LLSWA.org](#) and selecting LLS Firefighter stairclimb.